

Investigating Dance Improvisation: From Spontaneity to Agency

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Improvisational practices have generally been discussed in relation to the spontaneity of the dance (Bresnahan 2015; Carter 2000; Kloppenberg 2010). As Susan Leigh Foster has pointed out, improvisation can be envisioned as an interaction between the *known* and the *unknown*, which unfolds as a continuous moving back and forth and blending of predetermined and spontaneously discovered events (2003, 3–4; 2016, 219). This focus has led dance scholars toward analyses of improvisational practices that have highlighted the way in which the spontaneity deployed always has a context. That is, analyses of contact improvisation (Engelsrud 2007; Novack 1990) and of mambo as a social dance event in New York in the mid-1950s (Goldman 2010), and the contributions of American improvisational practitioners (Albright and Gere 2003; De Spain 2014) each in their own way exemplify how certain underlying premises and agendas of actual practice shape the conditions for what can count as unknown.

Although it is essential to be aware of the spontaneity that characterizes improvisational practices, it can be argued, as I will elaborate in this article, that any enactment of a dance has an element of spontaneity. No dance can be an exact or full repetition of previous enactments. As any performance of a dance will entail unknown aspects—and some degree of openness—it will also demand some degree of spontaneity from the dancer. However, the next step is not to argue that, accordingly, we should simply dissolve conceptual barriers between improvised and nonimprovised dances. Instead, I wish to emphasize that, by having accepted the potential openness and demand for spontaneity of any kind of dance practice, we should focus our investigations into improvisation on the ways openness and spontaneity are put to use or explored in enactments that specifically seek to experience and realize these aspects of the dance. In order to do so, I suggest, we need to turn our attention toward the way agency—a dancer's capacity to perform acts¹ in a given context—is exercised by the dancer in the enactment of the dance.

Several dance scholars have already touched on the role of agency in improvisation and taken fairly distinct positions. Descriptions of the dancers' way of exercising an alertness or attunement to being spontaneous have been described both as demanding an extraordinary kind of agency (e.g., Foster 2003, 7; Goldman 2010, 5; Kozel 2007, sec. 1.10) and as being about suspending control—so that the dancer can be “taken by surprise” (Gere 2003). Recently, the dance philosopher Aili Bresnahan

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(2014) has specifically targeted the role of agency in improvisation and argued that we should think of improvisational artistry as being based on a specialized kind of agency. There is no doubt that Bresnahan is onto something when she emphasizes that agency is exercised differently in improvised and nonimprovised dances. To progress toward an understanding of *how* agency is then exercised differently, I suggest we turn to enactive and phenomenological clarifications of agency and, in particular, to recent enactive accounts of agency by Ezequiel Di Paolo, Thomas Buhrmann, and Xabier E. Barandiaran (2017). By doing so, we can explore ways in which agency can be and is handled, and how it is explored or maybe even challenged by the dancer improvising. It is important here to emphasize that I operate with an inbuilt tension within the phenomenological and the enactive projects: this account targets insights that hold across contexts but are at the same time in a fundamental sense contingent on the potential analyses of the many kinds of practices, as these unfold in many different contexts. Thus, the following analyses will deliberately address a diversity of practices and use enactive phenomenological insights of relevance—being well aware that these insights might also be moderated or even challenged by other cases, contexts, and situations.

The line of argumentation falls in two main parts. Following some remarks on culturally based ways of thinking about improvisation as belonging to the creative craftsmanship of the artist, the first part is focused on substantiating the claim that any dance entails openness and invites spontaneity. Thinking about improvisation in these terms, any dance is improvised—albeit in varying degrees and ways. The second part aims at answering the contingent question as to how openness and spontaneity are put to use and explored in dancing considered improvised. Answering this question focuses on clarifying an enactive description of agency and on showing how such clarification can be used in the analysis of improvisational practices—specifically in the case of the Danish dancer and performer Kitt Johnson. Throughout the article, I use different examples of dance practice to support and illuminate theoretical parts of the argumentation. Any example is, by its nature, selective and illuminates the argumentation in slightly different ways. Other examples could have been chosen. In the selection of examples, it has been important to me to draw on dance practices that I have worked with in different research projects in order to ensure that, besides enlightening the theoretical argument, they also do justice to actual dance practices in use. Thus, the examples in use present regional examples of ballet and Argentinean tango as danced in Danish contexts.

Moving Toward Spontaneity—Considerations on How Appreciation Is Culturalized

In her historically informed analysis of improvisation in Western culture, Annie Kloppenberg (2010) points out that improvisation is not a new phenomenon in dance but has been appreciated and enjoyed for different reasons in different historical periods. The appreciation of spontaneity, which in large part characterizes our appreciation of improvisation in dance today, can be related to a shift in values deeply influenced by the improvisation found in jazz music during the 1940s and 1950s. Such a shift was grounded in a binary opposition that placed the spontaneity of improvising in contrast to the fixed condition of performing a choreographed dance piece (Benson 2003). As the philosopher Bruce Ellis Benson argues in his phenomenological analysis of music, this binary opposition underlies the ways in which the craftsmanship, related to composing and that of performing music respectively, have been recognized differently. While the former is thought of and referred to primarily as a creative event, the latter tends to be appreciated for the performers' ability to master technical skills and, to some extent, for their interpretative abilities. Importantly, Benson makes us aware of that the cultural appreciations we take part in influence our take on a phenomenon of phenomenological interest. In an interesting way, he uses a combination of hermeneutics and musicology to aim at moving beyond what seems implicitly to be given to us by our culturalized embeddedness. Against this background, Benson then argues that, from a phenomenological point of view, we should think of improvisation as addressing how the potential openness of any music played is

handled. Benson's point is that improvisation denotes an aspect of artistic engagement that might help us to rethink any binary opposition between, for example, composing and performing music.

From a phenomenological stance, the result of Benson's analysis clearly calls upon us to remember that, when all is said and done, we will never succeed in moving beyond our own being in the world. Nevertheless, Benson's analysis also reminds that in the analysis of a phenomenon like improvisation, we should aim to address the fact that our being in the world is not only a subject-centered matter of perception processes but involves us in these processes of perception as historical, social, and cultural embedded beings (Merleau-Ponty [1962] 1998). To put it more simply, in phenomenological analyses of improvisational practices, we should also critically address the culturized ways these practices are regarded.

In dance, culturally based distinctions about the artistic craftsmanship at stake are often recognizable in the way creative processes underlying the formation of a dance piece are separated out from the labor of rehearsing and performing an already choreographed dance piece. This distinction has often formed the backdrop for discussions of how these forms of craftsmanship can overlap and inform each other (e.g., Goldman 2010, ch. 1; Kloppenberg 2010; Predock-Linnell and Predock-Linnell 2001). In rethinking improvisation as related to the way the openness, which characterize any dance performance, is handled, a logical next step will be to specify the kind of openness offered even in the performance of choreographed dance pieces. In particular, we would need to specify what possibilities there might be to spontaneously add something extra to the dance in the very process of enacting it.

To Think of Any Dance as Improvised

However trivial it may seem, the first question to arise in the specification of improvisational possibilities concerns the "live-ness" of live performances—the fact that performing a dance live will include a readiness to cope with the live conditions of a performance—or, as Bresnahan has described it, a competence to "think-while-doing in a 'non-static context'" (Bresnahan 2014, 87). For the most part, the primary demand of performing a choreographed dance piece live is to cope with minor adjustments, such as coordinating movements so that contact with a partner happens at the right place and moment in dancing the pas de deux, adjusting to the tempo of the orchestra as it plays that night, and dealing with costumes and props. At other times, though, it presents dramatic challenges to the dancer's ability to handle, for example, sudden confusions, mistakes, and costumes or shoes that break (Bresnahan 2014; Montero 2013).

When discussing the phenomenology of expertise, the philosopher and former ballet dancer Barbara Gail Montero (2013, 2016) has on several occasions drawn on the practices and experiences of performing ballet dances. She specifically argues that, for the professional dancer, reflective awareness has to be—and is—present when performing a part in a ballet piece. Montero's argues *against* the belief that, on the basis of tacit knowledge and embodied experiences of dancing, the dancer simply does what has to be done while performing. In other words, she rejects the idea that the dancer as an expert mover would be "absorbed in the coping"² and enter a state of absent-mindedness when performing a well-rehearsed ballet piece. By emphasizing the mindful contribution of the ballet dancer in the live performance, Montero implicitly emphasizes that the ballet dancer's performance of known and incorporated movement patterns never unfolds as mere repetition. Performing a ballet piece requires the dancer to actively involve herself in a process of performing well-rehearsed movements in the conditions of the present. Montero's argument emphasizes the dancers' improvisational contribution to the uniqueness of the performance as a live event. However, fleshing out the uniqueness of the live event does not exhaust the openness available to a dancer performing a choreographed dance piece. As I will clarify in the following, at least two additional improvisational aspects are to be considered.

One of the interesting points in Benson's analysis of music is that we are to consider the musician's interpretation to be an improvisational contribution, as this interpretation is enacted in the actual performance. So, using part of Benson's logic of argumentation as a launch pad, I suggest that the first additional aspect to consider is the dancer's interpretative contribution—especially, how the dancer's interpretation both contributes to the uniqueness of the actual performance and how he or she, by doing so, exploits the potential openness of performing the dance—and accordingly the open-endedness of the dance piece. To make my point here as clearly as possible, let us turn to one of the oldest ballet pieces in the Bournonville repertoire³ in the Royal Danish Ballet. To dance the part of James in the Bournonville ballet *La Sylphide/The Sylph* (1836), for example, requires not only that the soloist dancer master the choreographed steps and gestures of his part in the ballet. We also expect the dancer to present *his* interpretation of James when performing the choreography of this dance piece and thereby to add something extra. This “extra” is precisely *not* to be found in the score but is nevertheless often the artistic contribution that we value most (Benson 2003, 84).

Recently, the director of the Royal Danish Ballet Nikolai Hübbe staged a new production of *La Sylphide* (2014) that included a reinterpretation of the main character James, of the wedding situation, and of the relation between James and the witch Madge, who lures James to try and catch the Sylph. To a large extent, Hübbe's reinterpretation of the dance piece was faithful to the original's choreographed steps and movements, but the scenario of preparing for the wedding was transformed from a family event in a colorful romantic ballet to a black and white evangelic family meeting. For obvious reasons, such changes not only invite but demand the dancers to explore and interpret their parts in the ballet in a relatively new context. No doubt, the performance of the dance piece is strongly informed by prior productions and interpretations, but, as is highlighted by such new productions, each performance potentially adds something to *La Sylphide* as a dance piece. The interpretative contribution of the dancers is clearly accentuated when a new production of the dance piece is to be performed. Again, in line with Benson's discussion of when and how a music piece is constituted as “a piece” (2003, 132, 154), we should think of the dance piece as incomplete and in process. The dance piece is never really set but continuously unfolding and only graspable in the very process of this unfolding. In that sense, the dance piece is characterized by a potential open-endedness, which invites for improvisational contributions—albeit in a minimal sense.

The second additional aspect to be considered concerns the ongoing processual constitution of the dancing body. The phenomenological fact is that neither the physicality of the dancing body nor its incorporated skills and habits are fixed. From this point of view and with a focus on the dancer's experience, dancing the role of James is not to be considered mere repetition but a re-creation of the specific part in the ballet. The re-creation is constrained by certain movement patterns and ideals. Nevertheless, it offers space for the exploration of the moving body on the part of the dancer. In other words, we should also consider an improvisational aspect more specifically related to the way the dancers engage in kinesthetic explorations of their bodies while dancing. As has been highlighted by several dance researchers, despite steps and movement patterns being well-known, the body never feels the same when dancing choreographed steps (Purser 2017; Ravn 2017; Ehrenberg 2015). For example, one of the ballet dancers at the Royal Danish Ballet emphasized that when taking daily classes, as well as preparing himself for performances, he engages in a continuous exploration of the intertwinement between the look and the sensation of his movement in order to continuously develop his technique and to perform according to the balletic ideal. In his own words: “I try to experiment and re-invent new ways and different ways of thinking connections in my body” (Ravn 2009, 2012, 2017). The very process of performing specific movements, steps, and patterns invites dancers to be aware of how their body feels today and how this “body of today” is best handled to perform a dance piece, for example, in accordance with the ideals of the context.

From the very distinct strands of movement repertoire and still postures of yoga, Foster (2016) has recently pointed out how her incorporated knowledge of the yoga pose and her “body of today,” as

she feels it, invite her to undertake kinesthetic exploration. She specifies that this kind of exploration unfolds as a continual discovery and that her mindful use of sensorial awareness guides a process which is improvisatory. She reiterates the point first made in her introduction to *The Dance Improvisation Reader*, edited by Albright and Gere (2003) more than a decade before, emphasizing that this internalized kind of interaction presents a “continual blending together of familiar and unanticipated materials and/or actions” (Foster 2016, 219).

The descriptions given us by Foster and the ballet dancer, each in their way indicate that rehearsing and enacting incorporated skills and movement patterns opens spaces for improvising with sensations and nuances of how embodied patterns and skills are performed. A dancer might, of course, be more or less interested in exploring a felt sense of her body while performing certain movement patterns or fulfilling her role in a ballet piece. The point is, that sensations and nuances of how the body feels today can stimulate improvisational contributions—even if the dancer is to perform familiar choreographed movements.

An Enactive and Phenomenological Take on Agency

Once we appreciate that the enactment of any dance has an element of open-endedness and invites or demands some form or degree of spontaneity, we then need to ask the contingent question of how we should understand improvisation as a practical engagement in the actions of dancing. In attempting to answer this question, I concur with Bresnahan that we should turn to those philosophers of mind who are engaged in accounting for how movement, thinking, and agency are closely connected, and agree that these accounts will form a solid ground for understanding, “how dance performers are able to integrate bodily processes and environmental awareness into their spontaneous agency during live performance” (Bresnahan 2014, 90). However, I do not altogether see eye to eye with Bresnahan about which philosophers of mind to bring in play. In the following, I will contend that we should turn to the enactive accounts of agency, which present more radical clarifications of how meaningful and intentional agency emerges in movement than those suggested by Bresnahan. To be more specific on what an enactive approach to agency entails, I will therefore begin by placing it, however briefly, in relation to Bresnahan’s work on agency and improvisation.

In her philosophical analysis of improvisational dance practices, Bresnahan defines agency in a broad sense as “the control and intention the dance performer has to move in a certain way” (2014, 86). Drawing on the work of Andy Clark, a philosopher of mind, she emphasizes that the mind works in an embodied and extended way. Thus, agency is for her not about the mind being the controller of the body as if it is some kind of instrument or means to fulfill intended actions.⁴ Instead, she emphasizes that we should think of agency as an interactive and bodily affair, which unfolds as part of and *not* necessarily in advance of actions. In that sense, agency is our capacity to engage in and form part of actions, as these are aroused through the way we form part of situations. Drawing on Clark’s discussions, Bresnahan’s explains that the dancer’s ability to select a way “to effectuate and perform the dance from his or her possible movements” is grounded in a “body-and-environment-involved agency” (Bresnahan 2014, 87). Dance training is thereby to be understood as a specific kind of agentic training—equipping the dancer to move from a certain repertoire of possibilities.

From the point of view of philosophers of mind related to the enactivist camp (e.g., Gallagher 2017; Di Paolo, Buhrmann, and Barandiaran 2017), Clark presents a functionalist view. On the one hand, Clark insists that the mind works in embodied and extended ways and that problem-solving is distributed accordingly. On the other hand, perception is still understood as forming part of inferential—or simulative—processes (Gallagher 2017, 16 ff). The world-engaging actions that Bresnahan emphasizes are, no doubt, based on an understanding of the mind extending beyond the borders of the brain. Yet, as Di Paolo, Buhrmann, and Barandiaran point out, in Clark’s descriptions,

perception is still *centered* in the brain and considered a form of brain activity (2017, ch. 2).⁵ By comparison, enactivist approaches push toward a more holistic conception of cognition—and the mind. This includes a more radical understanding of what it means to think of the mind as embodied and extended. From the enactivist point of view, “perception is for action”⁶—and this “action-orientation *shapes* most cognitive processes” (Gallagher 2017, 40; italics added).⁷

Combining enactivist approaches with phenomenological accounts of experiences from a first-person perspective, Di Paolo, Buhrmann and Barandiaran (2017) have recently shown how our meaningful engagement in the world is fundamentally movement driven. Their starting point is that “an agent is someone with the capacity to perform acts” (2017, 6). In accordance with the enactivist camp, their analysis of agency is closely associated with any living organism and grounded in a progression in complexity from minimal sensorimotor agency in simple organisms, to an open form of sensory agency characterizing us as human beings. In their analysis, they develop the idea that agency is necessarily contingent upon self-individuation, interactional asymmetry, and normativity. Self-individuation concerns the organism’s ability to sustain itself as a system distinct from its environment. This is a process of distinction, which unfolds in a world-involving way: in processes of self-individuation, the organisms also come to define an environment in which their activity is carried out (2017, 111–112). To answer the contingent question posed in this part of the article, we are primarily interested in “interactional asymmetry” and “normativity,” as these aspects are of immediate relevance to the analysis of sensorimotor activity in cases of improvisation. These two aspects I shall now proceed to explore.

Interactional asymmetry indicates the capacity of an organism to sustain coordinated processes. It refers to the natural necessity to regulate one’s boundaries to different degrees of openness and, accordingly, to constrain energy flows in relation to the coordinated processes of the organism (Di Paolo, Buhrmann, and Barandiaran 2017, 134–135). That is, in order to *not* passively follow a flow, be blown away by the wind, or pushed away by the forces of others, one needs an interactional asymmetry to resist such forces. In sensorimotor terms and more closely related to our human capacities, we can think of the example of a cliff diver being carried away by gravity in her dive (Di Paolo et al. 2017, 118). Being able to cliff dive demands a forceful engagement on the part of the cliff diver. The dive is executed by engaging in a muscular push off the ground of the cliff, as well as an effort to keep a certain shape, while being pulled into the water by the force of gravity. The dialectic between being pulled toward the water and shaping possible figures and moves is based entirely on the capacity to be able to constrain energy flows. Grounded in interactional asymmetry, agency unfolds as this oscillation between letting oneself be pulled and actively manipulating the interaction in the cliff-body-gravity-water system. The same kind of consideration of agency can—of course—be linked to more complex situations. For example, consider the interactional dynamics of two bodies improvising an Argentinean tango. Dancing together, the follower receives the leads of her partner through their contact points in the upper body and lets the lead take her into the next step backward (Ravn 2019). Using the enactive clarification on agency, the dancer, to a lesser or greater degree, relies on and plays with interactional asymmetry to allow herself to be moved by the other. The leader here presents an external force, which she dialectically both moderates and incorporates into her own movement. At the same time, the two dancing the tango are moving among other dancing couples on the floor and are relating to the tango music being played and—for many tango dancers—relating to the other potential dance partners watching the dancing (Ravn 2016, 2019). These interactional possibilities of tango dancing present other kinds of forces, which in different ways influence the dialectic of how the follower ends up letting herself be moved.

Normativity concerns our ability to modulate our interactions or couplings with our environment, relative to the internal norms that structure us as agents. In practices of dancing, this enactive notion of normativity translates into an agency that is temporally extended and normatively restricted in various ways. As Merleau-Ponty describes in his much-cited work *Phenomenology of*

Perception ([1962] 1998), our perceptual fields open in and through our body *as lived*. We know our fields of action and perception, as they have taken shape in and as part of our intersubjective and worldly intertwining. Our ways of using a felt sense of our body when moving, as well as our approach to participating in different situations, are based on former experiences, as these former experiences also form part of cultural and social contexts (e.g., Csordas 1993; Potter 2008; Ravn 2017). In other words, no one comes empty-handed into an interaction. In both an experiential and a very physical sense, the dancer has built a certain body enabling a certain range of skills and habits with which she can respond to the dance situation. For instance, the ballet dancer has built a body and a capacity for interacting with her partner in a pas de deux that is quite different from the body and the capacity for interaction that characterize a tango dancer. The past is working into and constraining the dancer's options in the present, just as these options are again subjected to her preferences and goals—for example, how to interpret the role of James in *La Sylphide* or how to improvise a tango to the music of the famous tango composer and arranger Astor Piazzolla.

As enactivists like Shaun Gallagher and Di Paolo all agree, the sensorimotor coupling with one's environment—spelled out as contingent on individuation, asymmetrical relations, and normativity—is still insufficient for explaining the first-person perspective of the experience of agency (Di Paolo, Buhrmann, and Barandiaran 2017, 37; Gallagher 2017). We need to add the subjective and felt *sense* of agency to these descriptions. In phenomenological terms, we need to consider how our world-involving being is permeated by the diffuse sense that it is we who are initiating and controlling our actions (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, 158). Following the argumentation of Di Paolo, Buhrmann, and Barandiaran, our “sense of agency presents itself phenomenologically as a heterogenous collection of different ways or aspects of feeling in control that depends on context, the task, and the person's history and capacities” (2017, 211). This heterogenous collection includes both intentional aspects as well as “the processes involved in forming, selecting and realizing meaningful sensorimotor schemes” (2017, 187). So, for example, if we engage in walking on ice, this kind of walking predictably feels different than normal walking, and we find ourselves in a situation in which the walking is adjusted in ways that we cannot foresee. We generally have to react before we know of it and are not really in a situation in which we feel that our walking is under control (Di Paolo, Buhrmann, and Barandiaran 2017, 190). However, any of us would still feel that this is “me” walking on ice. That is, partly “losing” a sense of being intentionally in control of actions performed does not entail a loss of agency nor of one's sense of agency. Rather, we should think of the example “walking on ice” as presenting a specific way and condition for exercising agency.

Finally, in this relatively brief presentation of Di Paolo, Buhrmann, and Barandiaran's account of agency, it should be emphasized that their account does not exclude or eliminate mindful engagements in which we consciously decide to perform certain actions. It is, of course, always possible for me to decide that I want to make a jump, swing my arms, or insist on pausing when dancing the tango. The point is that, most of the time, many of our actions are enacted without the need of explicit awareness or decision making from our side. As they explain, when I go for a run, my running in rough terrain requires me to adapt my “running style,” which I do without any conscious reflection. However, at times I will, for example, also make deliberate choices, such as choosing how I should still adapt myself to the terrain as I step over the boulder laying there on the path. The different levels of intentional act blend, and thinner or richer layers of agency mix in with our normal way of engaging in an activity—such as running in the rough terrain. Di Paolo, Buhrmann, and Barandiaran suggest that this includes the idea that nonconceptual involvement in the selection and control of my actions “allow[s] me to experience myself as the author of my running activity, or put another way, to realize myself as a runner” (2017, 183).

As I pointed out in the introduction, improvisation always has a context. Accordingly, agency is exercised on different conditions and premises. In addition, we should be aware that we approach the same kinds of situation differently. For example, improvising the Argentinean tango with a

partner might mean very different things to the dancers involved depending on their past experiences with the contextual setting of the event and the kind of improvisation they have in mind. Typically, the first times a tango follower has to find a way to participate in a *milonga* (the local places where the Argentinean tango is danced) and to improvise a tango with a complete stranger, her movements might be compared to the experience of walking on ice, as she reacts to invitations that are presented in—to her—unexpected ways. However, this is hardly the case when the experienced follower improvises a tango with an experienced leader at a *milonga* both of them are familiar with. On the basis of the interaction they establish, they will also juggle their relation to the music, to other dancers, and to the other tango dancers watching, while playing with tango figures unfolding in the tension between sedimentation and spontaneity (Ravn 2019). That is, within the given dance context, we should expect that the experienced improviser will engage in the dialectical tension of forces differently, compared to a newcomer.

Practices of Improvisations—The Case of Kitt Johnson

My intention in introducing the examples of dancing a ballet and improvising an Argentinean tango in a Danish context was, first of all, to illuminate and support the argument that we should investigate improvisation in terms of agency. The following case-specific exploration of Kitt Johnson's practices involves the use of enactive phenomenological clarifications of agency to investigate how agency is exercised by this particular dancer in her improvisation. Thus, the analysis uses enactive and phenomenological insights to elucidate a certain practice. However, as I have discussed in-depth elsewhere (He and Ravn 2018; Ravn and Hansen 2013), the case-based analysis of contextualized practice also has the potential to contribute to and challenge enactive and phenomenological descriptions. As mentioned briefly in the introduction, the following analysis aims to adapt insights from the specificity of practice, as these unfold on contextualized conditions toward a greater generality of phenomenological and enactive descriptions.

Kitt Johnson's (www.kittjohnson.dk) training background can be found in German expressionist dancing, Butoh-related performance—especially The Body Weather work of Min Tanaka—and Body-Mind Centering. Processes of energy transformation, then, are key to the way Johnson handles and develops movement and interactions in her artistic explorations (Ravn 2009, 2017; Ravn and Hansen 2013). This approach means that, when she performs, she considers the movement patterns and shapes of her body as secondary to her work on energy transformation. In performances, the movement patterns and shapes of her body are set, but her very focus on energy means that she insists that her performances are also always improvised. Besides improvising in the performance situation, Kitt describes how she uses improvisation as a tool in the periods of explorations underlying her creation of a new performance.

The interview that formed the empirical ground for the analysis presented here was based on my former research into Johnson's work. I prepared the interview by reading through transcriptions of former interviews and notes taken from observations of several of Johnson's performances, and reviewing the ethnographical fieldwork I conducted by participating in workshops and training organized and lead by Johnson. I arranged with Johnson that I would use these interviews and notes as the basis for preparing an interview guide specifically focused on how she improvises. In this sense, my former work with Johnson framed the interview and contextualized how the practices were described and talked about. Yet, the interview was still carried out by adhering to the first priority, namely to listen and to follow up descriptions and themes of importance that Johnson brought up during our dialogue—an interviewer position that in the field of qualitative research is referred to as being an active listener (Thorpe 2012).

Because descriptions were already organized around main themes central to Johnson's practice and to her ways of addressing and talking about such practice, the first round of coding of the transcribed interview could be kept within the structure of the interview. With this as a basis,

descriptions and interpretations of these descriptions were critically assessed by addressing “significant indigenous themes and categories” and “themes and categories reflecting the analyst’s theoretical ideas”—also addressed respectively as emic and etic themes (He and Ravn 2018, 4). The etic themes in this analysis were, clearly, the enactive and phenomenological clarifications of agency. This latter part of the analysis proceeded as an iterative process, in which I both constructively and critically questioned the relation between the emic and etic constructs as these took form (Morris et al. 1999; Olive 2014).⁸

Improvising Solo Performances

Talking about her solo pieces, Johnson compares the choreography with an “empty form”—a kind of “container,” which she fills out when enacting the dance. A bit later in the interview, she explains that “the set material is just the hopper through which the essence of this dance piece is to pass.” In order to be able to fill out the container and pass on the literal, Johnson juggles her attention between different interactive aspects associated with the performance. At my request, Johnson lists the interactional aspects that are important to her improvisation when performing. Her description includes the musician, the light designer, the audience, the physical environment of the stage, and her feelings in the night’s performance. Each in their way, and with different kinds of importance, these interactive possibilities present poles of energy that contribute to the enactment of the dance. Johnson has collaborated with the musician and light designer for decades, and she emphasizes that their roles in the performance of a live solo piece are also executed as improvisations. The three of them participate in a continuous row of encounters, in which the performance venue contextualizes the solo performance. Johnson emphasizes that, in contrast to the role of the musician and light designer, the audience is the important joker in the encounter. It is only when meeting the audience that she realizes what the actual solo piece “is.” In this encounter with the audience, the lighting, the music, and her sense of herself are “brought somewhere else.” In the words of Johnson: “The audience is the joker—we don’t know that card, and every evening that card turns out differently.”

Johnson’s sense of grounding and of the vertical are closely related and seem to form a ground for her approach to working with the physicality of her body. She emphasizes that it is fundamental to her to feel that she is in sync and aligned with her grounding. At the same time, Johnson explains that her (overall) sense of herself is central in her preparation for performing the solo pieces. Up until twenty-four hours before the performance, she will be aware of the way she feels and use the sense of herself, as it is here and now, as the ground for deciding if she will, for example, spend her time on her own or with other people, such as, for example, the rest of her group. Closer to the time of the performance, she focuses more intrinsically on what her body feels like, on whether she feels she needs to stretch, run, or do something else. Thus, a large part of Johnson’s preparation is based on, and works as, a kind internalized interaction, comparable but also very different to the kind Foster describes when she uses her sensorial awareness in her exploration of yoga poses. For Johnson, the internalized interaction is presented mainly as an important tuning of herself and her body to being able to improvise the performance with an appropriate presentness. It is about what she needs to do to be able to deliberately juggle her attention, to use the poles of energy in the enactment of the performance. It is like “multitasking,” as she puts it. Comparable to the cliff diving and the tango improvisation mentioned earlier, in a dialectical fashion, Johnson both moderates and incorporates the energies that characterize the encounter of this night’s performance. Johnson is very aware of, and explicit about, the different roles which these poles of energy play in the encounter. Her experienced and skilled interaction with these poles of energy is decisive for how the solo piece is enacted in the evening’s performance. From my former research, I know that her insistence on handling the performance of the dance on the condition of the different kinds of interactor becomes manifest in the length of the solo pieces. *Stigma* (<https://www.kittjohnson.dk/english/stigma>)—the shortest and oldest piece in her repertoire—can, for example, vary between about twenty-three to over thirty minutes. I suggest we think of Johnson’s skilled way

of juggling with poles of energies as a very special way of exercising her agency—especially the asymmetrical relations—and that we can think of Johnson’s way of improvising as an expertise in mastering a specialized kind of oscillatory process of assuming and relinquishing agency.

Using Improvisation as a “Tool”

The explorations grounded in the body that lay the foundation for the creation of Johnson’s performances typically runs over periods of three months. Her agenda for using improvisation as a tool in this exploratory period is based on specific kinds of imagination, or “it can be more like themes,” as she explains. In these periods and on a daily basis, Johnson works by herself in the studio for several hours at a stretch. She emphasizes that it is important to her to engage in this kind of exploration alone—and that she thinks of it as a kind of meditation. She describes how she “feels like an antenna” and that being able to do so demands that “you dare feel lost and to keep on being open to what might come.” She goes on to explain:

I refer to it as a private space—and at the same time it feels like anything but a private space. But it is not private in relation to my social I . . . it’s not there [that the improvisation unfolds]. But, when I am alone, it feels utterly universal—like I am in connection with it all—and I can’t be in connection with it all if I—if I am my social I.

Johnson emphasizes that she seeks to be as “non-conscious as possible” at this point in her exploratory process, when starting something up and delving into a theme. What this is about is “not to control one’s way through the process to come up with things.” Sometimes what shows up can be a picture of a specific way to move or a certain space that invites a certain energy in movement. She further explains that “then after a while I hold it, reflectively, up against the theme of my exploration.” She video records her sessions, and the phases of reflective labor are to a large extent based on watching the videos rather than recalling and memorizing how she moved when “something” came up.

Using improvisation as a tool in her exploratory periods, Johnson seems to wait for those poles of energy to arise. She places herself in a situation in which she waits to be moved. In doing so, she not only restrains her urge to move in (partly) habitual ways, she also restrains, it seems, an agential urge. On relative terms, the way she exercises agency when she is “her normal social I” is on hold. In enactive and phenomenological terms, I suggest that Johnson here practices a fairly radical way of exercising the asymmetrical relation of her agency. In other words, agency is not put on hold just like that. Johnson’s descriptions indicate that to do so involves an expertise in being able to hold back—or bracket—the asymmetrical relation which normally characterizes her agency. At the same time, in the process, Johnson seems also to be challenging the normative aspects underlying and supporting the way she exercises her agency when being what she refers to as “her normal social I.”

In Conclusion

A starting point for my argument has been that the performance of any kind of dance will entail some degree of openness and demand some degree of spontaneity. Thus, what is characteristic of improvisation is not the facts of its novelty, openness, spontaneity, and so on but the ways these qualities are put to use when enacting the dance in performance. The interesting question is, therefore, how improvisation as an embodied event is managed through the agency of the dancer. In other words, how agency—understood as our ability to perform acts—is exercised relatively differently in dances considered improvised compared to dances in which the spontaneity of the dance performance is treated as practicalities.

To answer this question, I have contended that the enactive clarifications of agency provide rich sources for understanding movement, thinking, and agency as being closely connected. Di Paolo,

Buhrmann, and Barandiaran's (2017) account of how our meaningful engagement in the world is fundamentally driven by movement has been central to being able to develop an understanding of how agency unfolds in a dialectical relation with external forces. The difference between performances considered improvised or "not improvised" is not that such dialectic oscillation is either present or absent but that it is *exercised* differently. For example, when the dancer is letting herself be moved by a partner or by a combination of several interactors, her way of being moved and incorporating the forces of interactors unfolds in a relatively different way compared to the way she handles interaction in her everyday life. I suggest that such experience of partial relinquishing of control introduces special—and possibly specialized—ways of negotiating the dialectical oscillation. As exemplified in the case of Kitt Johnson, the expertise of the improviser can relate to the ways she exercises the asymmetrical relation on which agency is contingent. Especially when Johnson engages in improvisation as an exploratory tool for creating new solo pieces, she exercises a mastery of this dialectical oscillation in a radical way. Her agency—as well as her sense of agency—are, in enactive terms, "thin." Maybe they are even "so thin" that her practice in a further researcher dialogue with an enactivist and phenomenologist would challenge our insight into how "thin" agency can be—and the degree to which we might be able to put our urge to perform actions on hold.

The case of Kitt Johnson, of course, in no way exhausts what can be said about improvisation and the ways agency can be exercised. It should not be misunderstood as if presenting a paradigmatic example. Clearly, analysis of improvisation practices in other dance contexts and of dancers with very different training backgrounds will add to the multiplicity and depth of understanding improvisational practices. Still, I contend, the analysis presents a valuable beginning point for understanding the ways agency can be handled when improvising. Using enactive clarifications of agency in the analyses of Johnson's improvisation practices give good reason to suggest that, as an experienced improviser, she presents a mastery of changing the oscillatory process of assuming and relinquishing agency as this agency unfolds on contextualized conditions.

Notes

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1. This understanding of agency is based in the enactive and phenomenological descriptions of agency and sense of agency, which will be further clarified in the second half of the article.

2. An understanding of expertise as characterized by absorbed coping has been specifically contended in the phenomenological descriptions presented by Hubert Dreyfus (2002, 2013)—descriptions of expertise that have been heavily discussed, and not least criticized, in recent years (e.g., Høffding 2018; Montero 2016).

3. August Bournonville (1805–1879) was a dancer, choreographer, and shaper of one of the world's great classical ballet schools. Today, the Bournonville style and his ballets still present a distinctive feature of the repertoire of the Royal Danish Ballet.

4. Bresnahan describes this approach—the mind being the controller of the acting body—as "standard theories of mind." She does not specify this further, but I assume she refers to computer simulation theories grounded in representational understandings of cognition, as spelled out by Shaun Gallagher (2017), for example.

5. This is taken from Shaun Gallagher's account of the differences between philosophers of mind. For the higher cognitive processes, Clark's theory is still consistent with a robust representationalism as well as with minimal representationalism for action (Gallagher 2017).

6. This is an understanding which works very well as an extrapolation of Merleau-Ponty's ([1962] 1998) phenomenological descriptions of perception: that we see things in terms of what we can do with them—for example, how we can reach and manipulate them.

7. In enactivist accounts of movement, thinking, and agency, movement is fundamental to our meaning-making capabilities. As recently emphasized by Michele Merritt (2015), enactive accounts can thereby be closely connected to central parts of Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's work, as presented in *The Primacy of Movement* (1999). However, as Høffding and I have argued in another article, there are also foundational aspects of Sheets-Johnstone's account that are incompatible with the enactive account—especially when it comes to action and agency. In Sheets-Johnstone's account, agency becomes a second order product of movement—in the enactive approach, action, agency, and the sense of agency are built into the sensorimotor activity as such.

8. For a more detailed description and discussion of the methodology in use, see also Hjortborg and Ravn (in press) and Ravn and Hansen (2013).

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